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THE CHURCH IN ITS SOCIAL ASPECT

BY REV. EDWARD JUDSON,
Pastor, Memorial Baptist Church, New York.

The local church, when it finds itself in a peculiarly unresponsive and adverse environment, instinctively proceeds to supplement its ordinary functions, as preaching, prayer meeting, Sunday school, and pastoral visitation, with a system of philanthropic and educational institutions, through which it endeavors to touch people on the physical, social, and mental sides, in order to draw them within hearing of its religious message. In this way it becomes an institutional church. Church institutionalism is nothing more than organized Christian kindness. At bottom it is no new thing. Any church that has a sewing circle, is in just so far an institutional church; which only does as a social body, and in a systematic way, exactly what the individual Christian instinctively does, when, by acts of kindness, he subdues the hearts of men into receptiveness. The community is touched in a new spot when it finds out that the Church is interested in the welfare of the whole man. There could hardly be devised a more efficient philanthropic appliance for ameliorating the misery of a great town than the network of churches spread through its congested places, provided each church intelligently and profoundly interests itself in the cure of the social sores constantly exposed to its pitying eye. Some people are fond of tracing the roots of all our modern philanthropy back to Christianity; but the connection between the Man of Nazareth and the social compunction of the present day would seem more direct if the churches that bear His name, instead of leaving to private individuals, or to the state, or to societies exclusively charitable, the burden of caring for those who suffer, should themselves engage in the sympathetic study of social problems, and should feel a certain responsibility for man's welfare here as well as hereafter. If each church should, even in a small way, befriend the miserable close by its side—neglected children, the aged poor, the sick, the intemperate, the indigent, the fallen, then the working man as he passes a place of worship would have the same tenderness of spirit

as comes over him now when he passes some great hospital and sees the white faces of little children at its windows and thinks to himself that his turn may come to be folded in its shelter and embrace. The social forms through which the Church expresses its sympathy and compassion are like the soft tentacles which some creature of the sea stretches out on every side in order to explore the dim element in which it swims, and to draw within itself its proper food. The Church needs just such organs of prehension with which to lay hold upon the community about it. The Institutional Church is a kind of tentacular Christianity. The divine Peasant, had He been acquainted with modern agricultural processes, might have carried His Parable of the Sower a step further than He did, and laid upon His disciples not only the task of scattering the seed over all kinds of soil, but also the more strenuous labor of changing into good ground the hard road-bed, the thorny patches, and the rocky places. This surely would not have been incongruous with His own example and His subsequent teachings.

Having defined the Institutional Church, we inquire next in what kind of field it finds its richest opportunity for development and operation. It is under the pressure of an adverse environment that the local church tends to *institutionalize* (if we may coin a word suited to our definition). There are spots, it may be, in new and growing towns, or in the suburbs of large cities, where the currents of social life converge in favor of ecclesiastical growth. Church-going people arrive in shoals, and, unless the churches, in their eagerness to pre-empt such fields, which they are fond of calling strategic points, get in each other's way, and multiply so rapidly that the supply exceeds the demand, they seem to grow of themselves. The ordinary methods suffice. Given a good minister, with a commodious meeting house and alluring music, success comes swiftly and inevitably along the worn pathway of sermon, and prayer meeting, and Sunday school, and pastoral visitation; that is if you mean by success, not the diffusion of Christian truth throughout society at large, but the building up of one's own church. The minister's pleasure, however, in seeing his own pews filled is mitigated by the reflection that other churches somewhere else are correspondingly empty. His sheep bear the brand of previous ownership. No dent has been made upon the great non-church-going mass. He has only given the ecclesiastical kaleidoscope a turn,

and produced a new arrangement of the same old bits of colored glass. What is the net gain to Christianity at large, when one church has achieved its development by sucking the life out of a score of feebler ecclesiastical growths? In such fields there seems little call for the Institutional Church, and all her devices are lightly esteemed.

It is in more difficult fields that she gains her scanty triumphs, as in the low, congested sections of our large cities, where, against the few churches that have been left behind in the general exodus, all the great social currents swiftly and steadily converge. Lower New York, for instance, offers a rich field for institutional experimentation, and indeed upper New York seems all the time becoming lower New York. The south end of Manhattan Island, rapidly narrowing down to its vanishing point at the Battery, is densely filled in with business buildings, little space being left for residential uses, as liquid fills a retort evenly and completely from the bottom up, as far as it reaches. But from the City Hall upward the island abruptly widens out east and west, becoming twice as wide. It is a walk of a mile from river to river along Fulton street, and of two miles and a half along Houston street. Now, from the point where this widening occurs, business does not monopolize the whole surface of the ground to the exclusion of residences. It skirts the water fronts and the main thoroughfares, like Broadway, and it climbs skyward by means of elevators, leaving in its resistless progress northward and upward vast masses of unassimilated population denser than anywhere else on earth. Here a mission field of unsurpassed richness presents itself to the Church. Children swarm in the streets like rabbits in a warren. Night and day one is confronted by the hideous spectres of prostitution, pauperism, drunkenness, crime. Materialistic habits of thought pervade the thin mental soil of the people. Alien races, often with stiff prepossessions against churches, jostle each other, Latin, Celt, Slavic, Semitic. They behold the spectacle of Protestant churches slowly dying out before their face and eyes. The growth of great ecclesiastical institutions uptown or in the suburbs makes no impression upon them. These people have a narrow horizon. They draw their conclusions from the outward appearance and from phenomena close by. They are overawed by that only which obtrudes a solid materialistic front, like a great school house, or a

massive commercial building, or gaudy saloons and theatres. The church edifices are in disrepair. The wealth has gradually leaked out of them through the removal of members uptown or to the suburbs, and their appliances for worship are correspondingly weak. This vast neglected population provides the environment and the field for the Institutional Church.

There are three courses open as regards the downtown problem. There is, first, the policy of abandonment, the Church confessing its inability to cope with the forces that converge against it, and withdrawing, little by little, from the field. It then becomes a traveling show. It forsakes just those sections of the city where it is most needed. Vast masses of people are left unchurched. There is presented the singular spectacle of Christendom sending missionaries to the heathen beyond the seas, and contemplating with indifference and hopelessness the extensive and vigorous growth of heathenism in the very vitals of its own country. We pay the traveling expenses for our best men and women to preach the Gospel to foreigners at the ends of the earth, and when these same foreigners come to us of their own accord, paying their own traveling expenses, we turn away from them with antipathy and despair. Italians have a glamor and picturesqueness in Italy, which disappears upon their arrival in America. Like their own olives, they seem to lose their flavor through transportation over sea water.

But these neglected masses in the lower wards of our city have their revenge. They are a constant menace to our distinctive American institutions. We cannot escape them. They cling to our flanks and follow us as we proceed northward on our narrow island. We catch their diseases. They have a saloon on every corner. They outvote us at our elections. A miasma stealing up from the widening social swamps infects our whole municipal life. The wise ostrich endeavors to escape her pursuers by hiding in the sand her too conspicuous head, assimilating her body to the sand dunes around her; but such an artifice will not avail with Christian churches. The difference between the Irishman and the Frenchman, according to Heine, is, that when the Irishman does not like the government he emigrates; but when the Frenchman does not like the government, he makes the government emigrate. The Church has pursued too much the Irishman's policy, fleeing from

adverse environment instead of subduing it. It is like the company of militia that enlisted with the express understanding that they were never to be taken out of the country, *unless it should be invaded*. This policy of retreat is fatal to Christianity, as in dropsy the water rises little by little until it submerges the vitals.

The second alternative is for the Church to cling indeed to the old fields downtown, assuming, however, that the methods of former generations will suffice for the requirements of to-day. instead of readjusting its gearing to the changed conditions.

"New occasions teach new duties."

The masses in New York require our very best preaching, architecture, and music. It is a mistake to try to reach them with cheap and nasty appliances. If I had my way, I would put the most beautiful churches among the homes of the poor, so that it would be only a step from the squalor of the tenement house into a new and contrasted world. The rich have beautiful objects in their homes. They should be content with plainness in church. But when we bring together the poor and the sad, let their eyes, grown dim with tears and weariness, find repose and inspiration in the exquisite arch, and the opalescent window, through which shimmer the suggestive figures of saints and martyrs. Let their ears hear only the sweetest and most ennobling music. Let everything in church be educational and uplifting. If the rich and the poor are ever to meet together for common prayer, it must be in the territory of the poor. Money and locomotion are correlative terms, like heat and motion. The rich must come where the poor are, for the poor cannot go where the rich are. The poor used to be taught to be patient under their sufferings, in hope of a blissful hereafter. But now they are waking up to the fact that the rich, in their refinement of selfishness, propose to get the better of them in both worlds, not only to monopolize the good things of this life, but also to appropriate the things that are supposed to help people heavenward, as the best preaching, and music, and architecture.

It is bad economy to concentrate our religious efforts upon the more favored classes, neglecting those who need us most. Harm comes from such an uneven distribution of the sacred privilege. It is as if a general should focus his heaviest artillery upon the weakest point in the enemy's line. The strongest medicaments of

the Gospel should be injected into the most diseased tissue of the body municipal. Here lies the true missionary spirit. The churches need to feel more of that social compunction which is the high-water mark of modern civilization; that spirit which impels cultivated people to dwell in settlements among the poor in the midst of

"The fierce confederate storm
Of sorrow barricadoed evermore
Within the walls of cities."

The Institutional Church seems to be the only alternative left if we propose neither to abandon the downtown fields altogether, nor to till them with antiquated implements. The Church should cling to her old fields, no matter how hopeless and repulsive her changing environment may become, and not only strongly appeal to the religious nature of the people with her time-honored methods of prayer, and praise, and preaching, but all the while wisely supplement them with a system of institutions, educational and philanthropic, through which she may touch in a helpful way man's physical, mental, and social nature as well. Her best motto is her Master's word: "These things ought ye to do and not to leave the other undone."

But what are some of the social forms in which the life of the Institutional Church will express itself? These should be determined by the character of each individual field. One will learn to study the social situation and feel his way along, like a ferry boat entering its slip. He will all the time be asking himself the question, What social need exists in my immediate neighborhood, which has been overlooked by others, and which I better than others am cut out to meet? The commonest mistake of all is to do the very thing that others are doing. Imitativeness is the besetting sin of social workers. You see some church or society conducting a successful kindergarten. You say, "I will go and do likewise." In doing so, you impair the efficiency of the kindergarten already established, and the kindergarten you project turns out a failure because the kindergarten need in that particular neighborhood is already met. A better course would be for you to send the little children under your influence to the kindergarten already existing, and apply yourself to the task of meeting some entirely different social need. I would not establish a dispensary, with all its expensive and nerve-

wearing machinery, unless I were quite sure that ample provision of this kind were not already made for the sick in my neighborhood.

The longer I live the more delight I take in co-operating with everything good that is going on anywhere near me. The Church assumes its highest efficiency by taking the humble part of an intermediary between the individual sufferer and organized relief. On the one hand you have millions of dollars invested in charitable institutions, and on the other unclassified misery ignorant of the provision made for its relief. I try to keep myself informed regarding all the endowed philanthropies of New York, and when an application for help comes to me at my office hour, I at once ask myself the question whether there is not some organized form of relief that can grapple this particular case more scientifically and efficiently than I; for I feel that the little temporary help that I am able to bestow is a small matter compared with my bringing the sufferer within reach of some organized relief, of the existence of which he was ignorant. But the law of reciprocity requires that the church which undertakes to perform this intermediary function should contribute systematically to the resources of the organizations to which it sends its applicants for relief. Such friendly co-operation between the churches and other philanthropic institutions is the only safeguard against imposition and the overlapping of benefit.

I have not found other societies reluctant to co-operate with the Church in doing good. We keep in closest relation with the Charity Organization Society, and the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor; our relations are cordial with the churches of the other communions, the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, the Salvation Army, and Rescue Missions; we avail ourselves of the great hospitals and other charitable institutions that are not far away; we keep up friendly intercourse with the settlements in our neighborhood; the New York Kindergarten Association conducts one of the kindergartens in our building, the other one being maintained by the Board of Education of our city, which also provides in our hall a free lecture for the people once a week; we open our doors weekly to a Damrosch People's Singing Class; the Federation of Churches has a vacation school under our roof. In these and countless other ways we are

alert to emphasize the feeling of solidarity that ought to inspire all who are working together for the common good.

But while the Institutional Church will prize the opportunity of co-operating with other religious and philanthropic organizations, there will still remain much distinctive work for it to do itself. As far as our own work is concerned, of which the editor has asked me to write, besides the religious services on Sunday, every week night, Saturday included, summer and winter, and parallel with these religious services, there is something doing every night in the way of physical, mental, and social betterment, as gymnastic classes for women and girls, gymnastic classes for men, gymnastic classes for boys, boys' clubs, singing classes, sewing school, children's hour with the stereopticon and moving pictures, men's tea on Sunday nights, Young People's Literary Society, and so forth. In summer we do fresh-air work and operate five public ice-water fountains. These forms of work we have gradually adopted as meeting exigent social needs in our own individual field. Other institutions which we were almost the first on our field to establish, we have from time to time relinquished, as they have been taken up by other churches and societies, it being our aim not to overlap the activities of other workers, but rather to supply the social pabulum that is actually needed by the people about us and which is not within their immediate reach. Thus a person coming to our church any night in the week will find in one place a meeting for worship, and in other rooms, under the same roof, opportunities for mental, physical, and social recreation as well as self-development. In this way our whole building is practically occupied at all hours every day and on Sunday, and is never dark and deserted, like many of our costly sacred edifices that are in use on Sunday and perhaps one or two week nights, and the rest of the time are tenanted by mice, silence, and gloom.

In such work one soon becomes inured to small audiences. This is the difference between an *inspirational* and an *institutional* center. In the former instance you face a large congregation once or twice a week, while in the latter you meet the same people in small groups, at close quarters, and many times during the week. The aggregation of all these gatherings will probably be much larger than the audiences which the minister has on Sunday. I submit that character is more effectively molded by frequent

touches. You cannot get an angel out of a block of marble with a stroke of the chisel once a week. Take a single narrow case. An average New York boy comes to Sunday school once a week, and presumably receives a certain impression upon the religious side of his nature. Between the Sundays those impressions are washed away from his mind by the influences of home, and street, and school; and at the end of a long course through all the grades of the Sunday school, when the proper age comes for bidding good-bye to it, as to the day school, his character is the same as at the beginning. The Sundays are too far apart efficiently and permanently to mold the child's character. But suppose every week you touch the same boy, not only on his religious side in an effective way at the Sunday School, but often and regularly between the Sundays you reach him along physical, mental, and social lines by means of a children's hour, boys' club, gymnastic classes and other recreative functions, his cynicism is gradually subdued, he comes to love and respect you, he feels that he has found a friend in you, new ideals spring up in his mind, and you are encouraged by seeing his whole spirit softened and conciliated. I would rather meet ten boys three times a week than thirty boys once a week. The principle thus narrowly stated and exemplified is applicable to the Church in its larger relations and other departments. The passion for bigness is obstructive to the truest social progress. We need to learn the pedagogic value of the little.

In all institutional work there are certain limitations that need to be considered. The Church should be true to its distinctive religious message. Social problems are so difficult and so fascinating that they easily absorb all a minister's time and energy. He neglects his study and the care of his flock. He loses his priestly character and becomes a mere social functionary. In the betterment of humanity one usually works either in the realm of motive or in the realm of environment. Some say, "Improve a man's environment and you make him a better man." Others say, "Strengthen his motives and he will conquer his environment." Both are right. We should be interested both in the improvement of environment and in strengthening character, so that it will be robust enough to subdue and assimilate even an adverse environment, as a tree toughens its fibre by wrestling with the wind. Those who are endeavoring to better environment and those whose aim is to

strengthen character through faith ought to understand each other and work together. While the Institutional Church actively sympathizes with every effort to improve social and physical conditions it cannot afford to surrender its cheerful faith that righteousness is the parent of comfort, and that through the worship of the Eternal the individual is inwardly strengthened to endure the fell clutch of circumstance. All its philanthropy will be suffused with the religious spirit. In its life the churchly will take the precedence of the institutional.

But while the chief emphasis will rest upon the religious side of the work, there can hardly be a greater mistake than the use of philanthropy as a lure to religion. Our kindness to people, in the nature of the case, inclines them to be hospitable to the spiritual message which we desire to impart. But if we are kind with such an end consciously in view, then the quality of our kindness is vitiated. We must be kind for its own sweet sake without any ulterior consideration, or else our kindness loses its essential character. Your church institutionalism must not mean being kind to people with a view to getting them to join your church. Are you kind to a horse in order to get him to join your church? Working men resent exploitation. The minister who engages in social work in order to build up his own church is doomed to disappointment. The last church which a person desires to attend is the one where he sought relief and received it. We do not like to revisit scenes of past misery. I am inclined to think that institutionalism is a handicap to church progress. We are to bend with tenderness over social sores, even when we know that such occupation may, in the immediate future, impede, rather than promote, the growth of our own church. Self-respecting people do not like to attend a church that has come among them to do them good. They prefer to go where they are needed, not where their needs are ministered unto.

Mr. Charles Booth, the great English statistician, in his recent comprehensive work on the religious condition of the poor in London, makes the suggestive remark, "If the churches, instead of demanding how can we help you, were to ask even of the poorest and the worst, how can you help us, a road might open out." His investigations seem to prove that the churches which have made most progress among the submerged tenth have been the ones that have inspired the poor with the thought that they were needed,

not as objects of charity and good will, but for what they can contribute of character and personality to the Christian cause. The distinctive note of excellence and hope in the work of Booker T. Washington is that he represents a movement that originated with the colored race itself, and did not proceed from philanthropists on the outside who proposed to better the condition of the colored people by maintaining churches and schools among them. Somehow or other, people seem instinctively to resent having good done to them, and if we are to succeed among working people we must in some way produce and promote among them the sentiment of self-help, and remove from their minds the impression that we propose to patronize them.

Our message to the working people around us should be, not, you need us, but, we need you. The good fairy type of church does not meet the requirements of modern conditions. This is one of the dangers to be guarded against in church endowment. An ecclesiastical establishment, however magnificent its equipment, and imposing its service, can never really grip the people, unless they feel a sense of responsibility and ownership. Churches in which the gifts of the worshipers are not needed for the support of the worship, but are applied to missions outside, tend to produce a breed of ecclesiastical paupers.

We must constantly be on our guard lest we make the impression on the community that we exist simply to minister to its needs, and are ourselves independent of its sympathy and help. Otherwise we shall repel from us the very people who would form the best elements in a self-supporting church, and will magnetize and attract to our embrace worthless people in whom the religious instinct is rudimentary, and whose desires never rise higher than the loaves and fishes. The tendency is to produce hypocrites and ingrates.

No church that hoists the flag of relief has resources adequate to the clamorous requirements of poverty in a great town, hence bitter disappointment ensues. The applicants for relief feel that somehow they have been deceived. They have asked for bread and have been given a stone. The Church has encouraged them to think that they were to get employment, food, clothes, social recognition, and instead offers them the white fragrant flower of religion.

Working people, in order to be drawn into the churches, must

be made to feel that they are needed there. People lose their interest when they come to feel that they are mere ballast. They are not attracted by expensive establishments in which they feel that their small gifts are of little account. It is not that they do not enjoy beautiful things, but they suspect that they are wanted merely to fill the pews, in order to gratify the minister, and a few rich men, and they decline to be put to that use. They refuse to be mere passengers. No one depends upon them. It gradually dawns upon them that they are like a child in a perambulator, who seems to be driving a horse, but is being guided and propelled by a stalwart nurse from behind. It seems to them that the Church can get along without them. They are not hostile, nor even indifferent. They like to attend little wooden churches where their contributions count.

In this discussion of the Church in its social aspect, I seem to have indicated a steep and thorny path. The local church finds itself sometimes in an unresponsive and even hostile environment. This social phenomenon is apt to occur in the lower congested sections of our great town. The Church under this pressure tends to *institutionalize*. It supplements its ordinary methods with a system of social, educational, and philanthropic institutions with a view to conciliating the community in which it finds itself. These efforts are not directly and immediately promotive of the growth of the Church, but may even impede that growth, weaker natures being attracted by the prospect of social advantage, and stronger spirits desiring to go where they can do good, instead of having good done to them. Such an altruistic spirit, however, on the part of the Church carried on in a wholesale and systematic manner, and persisted in long enough, might in the end remove prejudices existing in certain minds against Christianity. But one would have to live long to enjoy a personal experience of such climatic changes. The Church is a means, not an end. The important thing, after all is not the building up of a church, but the Christianization of the community.